

Testimony of:

Tina Woods, former youth in care

Testimony on:

Senate Bill No. 410

Thank you Chairman Barker and the committee for the opportunity to testify in opposition to Senate Bill 410.

I am Tina Woods, a Senior at the University of Kansas in the School of Social Welfare and the past President of the Kansas Youth Advisory Council (KYAC). The KYAC is comprised of a group of current and former foster youth from across the State of Kansas who advocate for the rights of youth in care and to improve the child welfare system.

My involvement with KYAC has spanned seven years, and has given me the opportunity to learn from many different youth currently and formerly in care. Each of these youth, including myself, have differing stories and perspectives, just as each of the current youth in care have their own individual stories and needs.

I spent six years in foster care before I “aged out” and my time in foster care drastically improved my life. Foster Care not only improved my life by assuring I was safe, it also provided me opportunities such as obtaining an education. One of the biggest supports I had during this time was my foster mother, who not only has supported me while I was placed in her home, but to this day has taken the role of my family. I am very grateful to be given a home and a foster mother that assured me a strong foundation. It is my desire for other youth to have similar support and positive experiences.

SB 410 does not encourage individuals interested in supporting our youth to become foster parents. SB 410 places strict requirements on those who may participate and leads the public to believe only “certain” individuals can provide foster youth with a safe home and a strong foundation. While I understand that the CARE families program will not replace our current system, and is a pilot program. It will have an impact on our current families who are already working tirelessly to provide youth like me, with a healthy home and the agencies that are working to recruit families and individuals of all types to help those youth in care with all types of needs.

My foster mother is a single mother who has been a foster parent for 16 years. During this time she has fostered nearly 100 youth and children, who have been reintegrated with their families, successfully adopted, graduated college, have families of their own, and are successful members of society. My experience in foster care was positive due to her care and support.

Ultimately, the goal of placing a child in foster care, is to reintegrate them with their families. Although that was not possible in my situation, my foster mother was extremely supportive as I

processed what the relationship with my biological mother would look like. My foster mother never put down my biological mother or condemned her for her choices and inability to parent me. It is that exact mindset that youth may be able to successfully reintegrate back into their homes or accept that the relationship with their biological parent may not be possible at this time, but they are allowed to move forward in their lives and make positive choices and grasp the opportunities they are given.

It is clear due to the strict requirements SB 410 places on families, my foster mother would not have qualified. With a system such as the CARE families act, I would not have found permanency through my foster mother and I would not have the success I have today.

My foster mother has expressed fear of being looked down upon due to this special tier of foster families or even looked over for placements because she is not married. I fear that the creation of this bill will begin the segregation of our foster families, as opposed to create a unified system that works in the best interests of youth in care by providing them with opportunity to be matched to the foster family that best fits them. Foster families must be diverse because those of us in foster care are diverse.

In conclusion, although I do not support the passage of Senate Bill 410, I do believe that we should support our foster families and actively recruit individuals and families willing to give their heart to children that may return to their families of origin or become a permanent fixture in their lives.

Again, thank you, and I will now stand for questions.